

Marshall Memo 400

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
September 5, 2011

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Quotes of the Week

“Dropping out of school, for many, is the last step in a long process of disengagement from school.”

Jeffrey Jones (see item #7)

“Checking for understanding is the link between teaching and learning and should be part of every lesson that teachers plan.”

Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey (see item #2)

“When students are writing, they are thinking. In fact, it’s nearly impossible to write and *not* think.”

Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey (*ibid.*)

“I was teaching to my strengths instead of strengthening my weaknesses.”

Ama Nyamekye on what a rigorous external test showed her (see item #1)

“The test didn’t make my students smarter. It made the teacher smarter.”

Ama Nyamekye (*ibid.*)

“The perfect and unique cure for boredom when studying grammar has not yet been found, nor will it.”

Gladys Jean and Daphnée Simard (see item #6)

“We are in the infancy of teacher-evaluation reform. When it comes down to the details, we’ve got little more than educated guesses as to what will work best under which circumstances.”

Peter Meyer and Michael Petrilli in “NY Regents: Stop the Madness!” in *The Education Gadfly*, Sept. 1, 2011 (Vol. 11, #34)

http://support.edexcellence.net/site/MessageViewer?em_id=2185.0&dlv_id=6323

1. A New York City Teacher Has a Change of Heart About Testing

In this thoughtful *Education Week* article, Ama Nyamekye describes how, as a college student and then a rookie teacher in New York City, she pumped her fist in opposition to standardized tests. “I wanted to uplift my students and resented the weight of a looming high-stakes test,” she says. Confident in her classroom effectiveness, she believed that she knew what was best for her students.

But in Nyamekye’s second year, her principal posed a troubling question after a classroom visit: “How do you know the kids are really getting it?” This started a chain of thought about assessment. “Ego and uncertainty inspired me to measure the impact of my instruction,” says Nyamekye. “I thought I was effective, but I wanted proof.” The next year, she began giving archived questions from the New York State English Regents exam to her sophomores.

To Nyamekye’s surprise, students’ responses to the Regents questions revealed holes in her curriculum. The tests she had been creating were heavy on literary analysis (which she liked to teach) and light on grammar and punctuation (which she enjoyed less). “I was teaching to my strengths instead of strengthening my weaknesses,” she says. The Regents items provided important feedback on what needed improvement.

The grading process she used with the Regents tests resulted in another epiphany. Colleagues in the English department scored her students’ essays using a detailed rubric, which was far more objective than Nyamekye’s own grading. “I knew Michael was a talented, but lazy, writer,” she says. “I admired the dogged work ethic of Lian, a Chinese-born student, who struggled to master English. Naturally, I was emotionally invested in the success of my students – their grades were my grades.” External scoring gave her a more accurate picture of students’ strengths and weaknesses.

All this made Nyamekye realize that the anti-testing movement she had been a part of was “more about fear and politics than pedagogy. Teachers, I believe, are pumping their fists for the wrong reasons,” she continues. “... My colleagues fear the proliferation of drill-and-kill instruction. This outrage, though understandable, should be directed at the policies and school leaders that use standardized testing as a replacement – rather than a measurement – for inspired instruction. These... practices demoralize teachers and warp the aim of assessment.”

Standardized tests aren’t perfect, she says. Neither is teaching. “The exam excelled where I struggled, offering comprehensive and standards-based assessments. I thrived where the test fell short, designing creative, performance-based projects. Together, we were strategic partners. I designed and graded innovative projects – students participated in court trials for

Shakespearean characters – and the test provided a rubric that guided my evaluation of student learning.”

Nyamekye’s students improved throughout the year, and all who took the English Regents exam passed, most with high scores. Grammar and punctuation were still weak, but there was progress. “The test didn’t make my students smarter,” she concludes. “It made the teacher smarter. I learned that my job wasn’t simply to encourage students to relentlessly pursue knowledge. I need to constantly test what I thought I knew about teaching.”

“Putting Myself to the Test: A Teacher Finds Positives in Testing” by Ama Nyamekye in *Education Week*, Aug. 31, 2011 (Vol. 31, #2, p. 24),

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2. Strategies for Checking for Understanding

In this article in *Principal Leadership*, San Diego State University professors Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey describe an all-too-common classroom scenario. The teacher asks, “Did everyone get that?” and, hearing no response, moves on to the next point. Unbeknownst to the teacher, many students are thinking, “I have no idea what you’re talking about, but I’m not about to let everyone know that I’m confused.” Fisher and Frey believe that “Checking for understanding is the link between teaching and learning and should be part of every lesson that teachers plan... [It needs to occur] at least every 5-10 minutes, if teachers want to maintain the rigor of the lesson and support student learning.” They suggest the following strategies:

- *Listening in on student-to-student talk* – As students think-pair-share, engage in reciprocal teaching, literacy circles, and Socratic seminars, retell stories and video clips, and respond to prompts, the teacher should tune in on whether they are understanding what’s been taught and follow up accordingly.
- *Questioning* – Many classroom questions fall into the all-too-common, single-answer, “guess what’s in the teacher’s head”, Initiate-Respond-Evaluate pattern that privileges a few students who know the answers and are willing to play the game (“When do we use the FOIL rule?” asks the teacher. Four students raise their hands and teacher calls on Tanya, who responds, “With multiple binomials.” “Good,” says the teacher). Initial questions should be planned in advance, say Fisher and Frey, so as to elicit complex and critical thinking and involve as many students as possible. Some examples:
 - ReQuest – Students read with a partner and take turns asking each other questions, with the teacher monitoring the quality of questions and answers and prodding students toward higher-level queries.
 - Response cards – The teacher asks a question and all students hold up colored answer cards (green for Yes and red for No), giving a sense of the level of mastery in the class and whether anything needs to be re-explained.
 - Clickers – Students respond to multiple-choice questions via wireless response devices, and when results have been displayed (without an indication of which was the right answer), the teacher asks students to convince their neighbors, enlisting peer instruction

before re-polling the question. See <http://www.nassp.org/pl0911fisher> for a video of this technique in action.

Teachers often ask spontaneous follow-up questions after their initial probes to further check for understanding.

- *Written work* – “When students are writing, they are thinking,” say Fisher and Frey. “In fact, it’s nearly impossible to write and *not* think.” Short writing-to-learn prompts are an excellent way to check for understanding, as long as the prompts are carefully designed to give the teacher information on deeper understanding. Fisher and Frey particularly like RAFT prompts, which ask students to examine the role, audience, format, and topic of a piece of writing. For example, after learning about the Gettysburg Address, students were asked to write the following RAFT. Role: you are a person attending the dedication of the Soldiers’ National Cemetery in Gettysburg; Audience: you are writing to a family member; Format: a personal letter; Topic: Lincoln’s speech.

- *Projects and performances* – As students work on worthwhile projects or prepare for performances, the teacher can look over their shoulders, get a sense of whether they are understanding the essential points, and give formative feedback. For example, a teacher asked students to write about a cause they would be willing to fight and perhaps die for and post it on their Facebook page, and checked in on students’ work as it progressed.

- *Tests* – Although these assessments are usually treated as summative, there’s nothing to stop teachers from using insights from students’ answers to reteach and re-explain.

“Checking for Understanding” by Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey in *Principal Leadership*, September 2011 (Vol. 12, #1, p. 60-62), <http://online.qmags.com/PL0911>; Fisher can be reached at dfisher@mail.sdsu.edu and Frey at nfrey@mail.sdsu.edu.

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3. Restorative Processes in Schools

(Originally titled “Building Safer, Saner Schools”)

In this helpful *Educational Leadership* article, Laura Mirsky of the International Institute for Restorative Practices tells a familiar story. A student gets angry and curses out his teacher, and he is suspended for three days by the assistant principal. Yes, he is “held accountable” for his actions, says Mirsky, but is he really accountable? “The punishment is passive. The student doesn’t have to do anything. He stays angry with the teacher and the assistant principal. He thinks he’s the victim. He doesn’t consider how he’s hurt others or how he might make things right. And he returns to the classroom with nothing resolved.”

The alternative to this counterproductive dynamic is restorative processes, in which students confront their unacceptable behavior and assume responsibility for it. “This is not permissiveness,” says Mirsky. “Wrongdoing is not tolerated.” The goal is arriving at collaborative solutions, working with those involved, and preventing problems in the future. Mirsky describes three strategies:

- *The restorative conference* (reserved for the most serious incidents) – This is led by a trained facilitator, who convenes those involved and uses a structured format to explore what

happened, who was affected, and what needs to be done to make things right. Mirsky describes an incident in which two girls who had stolen \$20 from a school visitor's unattended purse. The girls met with the visitor, their own family members, and school officials. The visitor described how the theft had affected her (with a sick husband, she was the sole support of her family and the money meant a lot), and the girls expressed tearful remorse, offered a genuine in-person apology, and later wrote letters of apology. "There were no further behavior problems with either girl," Mirsky reports. Restorative conferences can be less formal than this one, and often have the same cleansing effect. Here are questions that might be asked of a wrongdoer in a conference:

- What happened?
- What were you thinking about at the time?
- What have you thought about since the incident?
- Who do you think has been affected by your actions?
- What do you think you need to do to make things right?

Here are questions for those affected by the wrongdoing:

- What did you think when you realized what had happened?
- What effect has this incident had on you and others?
- What has been the hardest thing for you?
- What do you think needs to happen to make things right?

• *Affective statements* – This is an "I-statement" in response to an upsetting behavior. For example, in response to a student banging her fist on her desk during class, a teacher said, "When you disrupt the class that way, I feel frustrated and angry." Affective statements may appear "soft", but they are actually very effective in making students aware of the consequences of their actions, creating empathy, and building relationships. Another example: a teacher said to two students who were balking at doing challenging work, "I'm disappointed when you give up because you're letting your frustration cause you to quit. I *know* you can do this. If you want my help, I'll help you, but you have to try."

• *The restorative circle* – Students and their teacher sit in a circle to address a chosen issue (for example, feelings about a test, goal-setting, establishing ground rules for a project, or discussing a conflict), one person speaks at a time, and everyone has a chance to contribute. "Responsive circles use peer pressure to bring about positive behavior change," says Mirsky. They provide students with a forum to share their feelings, ideas, and experience and build trust and mutual understanding.

Restorative practices build on cognitive research that indicates that humans are "hardwired to connect", says Mirsky. She cites examples of schools that have used this approach to make dramatic strides in combatting behavior problems and interpersonal conflicts.

"Building Safer, Saner Schools" by Laura Mirsky in *Educational Leadership*, September 2011 (Vol. 69, #1, p. 45-49), <http://www.ascd.org>; Mirsky can be reached at lauramirsky@iirp.edu.

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4. A Student Survey on Bullying

(Originally titled “What Students Say About Bullying”)

In this *Educational Leadership* article, Stan Davis (a Maine elementary teacher) and Charisse Nixon (a Penn State/Erie professor) describe what more than 13,000 grade 5-8 students said in response to the Youth Voice online survey about bullying (for detailed results, see <http://www.youthvoiceproject.com>). Students who had experienced bullying were first asked what they did in response, and then whether it made things better or worse. Here’s what students said:

- *What was least effective: Trying to handle it yourself* – These strategies made things worse most of the time:

- Telling a bully to stop (worse 32% of the time, better 22%);
- Telling the bully how they felt (worse 32%, better 25%);
- Pretending the bullying didn’t bother them (worse 22%, better 28%).

- *Somewhat more effective: putting responsibility where it belongs*: Reminding themselves that bullying wasn’t their fault made things better for 37% of high-school students, 35% in middle school, and 25% in elementary school. “These data suggest that as their brains develop and mature, students are increasingly able to offset the pain of being mistreated with their reflective knowledge that they are not responsible for what others choose to do to them,” say Davis and Nixon.

- *Most effective: Seeking encouragement, advice, and protection from friends and adults*:

- Telling an adult at school (38% said this made things better, 27% worse);
- Telling an adult at home (37% better, 16% worse);
- Telling a friend (36% better, 15% worse).

Davis and Nixon say the way teachers and other school personnel respond makes a big difference. Ignoring bullying and telling students to stop tattling and solve problems themselves definitely make things worse. Bringing in a speaker or lecturing the whole class or school about misbehavior does more harm than good. Punishing bullies produces better results in elementary schools and mixed results at the secondary level; severe punishments sometimes lead to resentment and retaliation.

Adult support, encouragement, and effective supervision, on the other hand, make things better, say Davis and Nixon. These are the key components:

- Supervising students vigilantly;
- Soliciting ideas from students and staff on rules, expectations, and consequences;
- Building a schoolwide framework of nurturing, warm relationships;
- Developing procedures for staff to follow when bullying happens;
- When appropriate, using smaller, consistent consequences to foster acceptance of responsibility;
- Dealing with more serious offenses with progressive discipline steps, parent notification, and interventions to help bullies learn more positive behaviors;

- Making retaliation or threat of retaliation for “telling” a serious offense.
- Helping chronic bullies develop empathy, self-control, and anger management;
- Getting students involved in hobbies, service activities, and strong connections with peers.

What can fellow students do to help? They don’t have to “stand up” to bullies. Instead, say Davis and Nixon, “small, quiet actions of support, such as calling the bullied student at home to encourage him or her, can also be effective.” The study identified 9,000 “quiet heroes” who behaved in this way and said they believed it made a positive difference.

“What Students Say About Bullying” by Stan Davis and Charisse Nixon in *Educational Leadership*, September 2011 (Vol. 69, #1, p. 18-23), <http://www.ascd.org>; Davis can be reached at standavis@yahoo.com, Nixon at cln5@psu.edu.

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5. Addressing a Negative Adult Climate

(Originally titled “Respect – Where Do We Start?”)

“Teachers who are stressed, unhappy, and unsupported by their peers are more inclined to treat their students with disrespect,” says California-based consultant Marie-Nathalie Beaudoin in this forceful *Educational Leadership* article. She quotes a teacher: “I start every day telling myself that I won’t yell at this particular student and end every day remorseful and discouraged because I just had too much on my plate and yelled after all.” Teachers’ lunch-time conversations with colleagues can turn negative: *You’ll never believe what he did this morning!*

Such problem-saturated conversations reinforce a narrow view of students and don’t produce constructive solutions, says Beaudoin. They may even lead teachers, custodians, and others to believe that they are *entitled* to be disrespectful toward students.

Faculty lunch may be a time when negative cliques meet and reinforce their shared mindset, walling themselves off from colleagues and poisoning the well. “The existence of cliques often means that some people are excluded from certain activities or put down or that unhelpful gossip about others infiltrates conversations,” says Beaudoin. “Many teachers anonymously report that when they hear a piece of gossip, they experience a sense of complicity, status, and belonging that can be satisfying if their daily experience at school is one of powerlessness or discontent.” This undermines trust, collaboration, openness, and creativity.

And this free-floating discontent has consequences for students. “A teacher who continually shows that he or she is annoyed by a student gives the rest of the class permission to be annoyed by the student, too,” says Beaudoin. This starts a downward spiral that is damaging to learning.

What can school leaders do in a school with a toxic climate? Beaudoin suggests the following:

- *Consider people’s intentions.* “Usually, when we don’t have compassion for someone’s struggles, it’s because we don’t understand the complexity of that person’s experiences,” says Beaudoin. Problem-saturated conversations need to be analyzed, as do

negative interactions with students. Criticizing a teacher for being sharp-tongued in the classroom may make things worse by increasing the teacher's unhappiness and negativity toward students. A better strategy is to focus on the underlying goal – making the school better – and asking whether certain behaviors will accomplish that. Beaudoin has conducted a number of staff meetings focused on the impact of negative talk on teachers' moods, enthusiasm, energy levels, relationships, and patience with students. Often this results in teachers adopting a "no-student-talk" lunchtime rule. "In some cases," she says, "teachers felt less need to talk about struggles because the energy they received from their more collegial lunches indirectly reduced their level of burnout with struggling students."

• *Wield your club wisely.* "Using power to solve a problem is often tempting because it may look like a quick solution and may even feel satisfying," says Beaudoin. "But in reality, it can lead to more insidious problems, such as resentment, rebellion, gossip, and disconnection." She tells about a teacher who became increasingly impatient with her students in her second year. The principal decided to approach the problem indirectly, encouraging the teacher's grade-level colleagues to support her. It turned out that the woman's teenage son had recently attempted suicide, and the extra support and understanding from her colleagues helped her get back on her feet. A few years later, she won the district's teacher of the year award.

• *Foster appreciation.* "Educators are so giving of their time, energy, hearts, and sometimes even their own personal finances that appreciation needs to be at the forefront of school reform," says Beaudoin. Yet even when principals think they are giving a lot of appreciation, teachers may feel unloved. "For appreciation to truly exist in a school, community members need to circulate it." Some ideas:

- Have appreciation days for different grade levels.
- Feature each educator in a weekly newsletter.
- Reserve staff meeting time for team-building and discussion of values.
- Have colleagues notice successful practices and share them.
- Create an Apple Award that one teacher offers to a colleague each month.
- Pick two names at meetings and encourage appreciative comments.
- Have students write a note to staff members who have made a difference.
- Budget for staff outings and retreats, fun team-building exercises, and creative workshops.

"Respect – Where Do We Start?" by Marie-Nathalie Beaudoin in *Educational Leadership*, September 2011 (Vol. 69, #1, p. 40-44), <http://www.ascd.org>

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6. Must Grammar Be Boring?

In this article in *Foreign Language Annals*, Gladys Jean and Daphnée Simard of the University of Quebec/Montreal report on what 2,321 students and 45 teachers said about grammar in second-language French and English classes. It turns out that these high-school students and teachers have remarkably similar attitudes about grammar: it's important but "oh so boring" – a *mal nécessaire* (necessary evil). Students said it was essential to do lots of

mechanical exercises and have their grammatical errors corrected so they could speak and write grammatically, but they disliked the process. These attitudes contribute to negative attitudes and are a real impediment to student motivation and success in the classroom and a desire to continue studying a second language.

Must grammar instruction be tedious? ask Jean and Simard. Couldn't it become a *bien nécessaire* – a necessary good? Based on their own experience, research, and teachers' successful practices, they suggest the following approaches:

- *Kill two birds with one stone.* “Choose an approach that does more than teach grammar,” they propose. “Start from the principle that grammar instruction should work as a catalyst for language acquisition, not purely as a way to learn the intricacies of the language and improve accuracy.” Grammar exercises should serve a dual purpose, also helping with vocabulary, oral and written proficiency, and cognitive skills. Students can handle the extra challenge, and it will make grammar more interesting.

- *Sell students on a livelier, more integrated approach.* Students will be more interested and motivated if they are given a rationale and asked to use grammar in realistic communication exercises – for example, situations in which accuracy is actually helpful in getting through to an audience. Jean and Simard also suggest getting students' ideas on how to make grammar more real-world and fun.

- *Try for transfer.* They suggest using exercises that closely resemble natural discourse – for example, using imperative slogans in a grammar exercise that will culminate in a performance task involving an advertising campaign.

- *One approach doesn't work in all situations.* “The perfect and unique cure for boredom when studying grammar has not yet been found,” say Jean and Simard, “nor will it.” They recommend experimenting with different approaches and recognizing that sometimes drill is the only way to go.

- *Grammar rules are not immutable laws.* They advise taking a constructivist rather than a juridical approach to teaching grammar and involving students in a thoughtful analysis of grammatical rules. The fact is that some rules are broken all the time, and students will be frustrated and confused if they are taught rules in a rigid way and then notice lots of violations. “A rule or law that is negotiated rather than imposed often has more chances of being used purposefully,” say the authors.

- *Teach grammar only when it is really necessary.* “All too often grammar points are taught because they are listed in the curriculum,” say Jean and Simard. “Students should first feel the need (on their own or through planned specific exposure) to study a grammar point.” Teachers should look critically at the curriculum and set priorities, and students should be able to see how working hard at grammar helps them speak and write more effectively.

- *Some “fun” exercises don't make grammar any less boring.* Jean and Simard believe that some grammar games are just meaningless drills in disguise. “They provide a good diversion, but they do not go very far in helping learners to build language skills,” they say. Integrating with real-world language tasks is a better approach.

7. What’s Working in a Successful Alternative School

“Dropping out of school, for many, is the last step in a long process of disengagement from school,” says Jeffrey Jones of Western Michigan University in this *JESPAR* article. His study of a high-functioning alternative high school tried to identify the “glue” that gets students engaged in school and motivated to pursue worthwhile personal and educational goals.

Jones believes that participation is a key to engagement and thus success, and postulates four levels of engagement in school:

- Level 1: Minimal compliance with classroom expectations;
- Level 2: Active classroom participation that is valued by most teachers;
- Level 3: Active participation in the school culture and community outside;
- Level 4: Active participation in school governance.

Through classroom observations and interviews with students and teachers during his year-and-a-half study, Jones identified the ways this school successfully moved students along the continuum, with emotional and relational support leading to greater and greater participation and engagement. Students often described a particular event that helped them get “over the hump” from the negative attitudes they brought with them from their previous schools. Often the turning point was working with school personnel to resolve a personal issue or crisis.

These were the ways in which a reciprocal process of increasing participation and engagement took place:

- *Value for school and school-related goals* – The key factors were relationships with caring teachers and other students in a close and supportive school community.
- *Belonging and engagement* – Students described the school as “homey” – an accepting and tolerant learning community, one in which they belonged.
- *Participation in classroom learning and the school community* – Teachers got students engaged with hands-on activities, constant questioning, and service-learning projects.
- *School identification and participation* – “School identification is, at its core, a question of person-environment fit,” says Jones. Students at this school were made to feel that they fit in, and commented on the different feel of their previous schools. It usually took a semester at the new school to get to this point, sometimes a whole year.

Jones identifies several other factors that account for this school’s impressive test scores and high graduation rate:

- A low student/teacher ratio;
- A 20-year history of program refinement;
- A professional and unrelenting staff that has “dedicated itself to getting in the way of students’ dysfunctional educational habits.”

“Narratives of Student Engagement in an Alternative Learning Context” by Jeffrey Jones in *Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk*, July-September 2011 (Vol. 16, #3, p. 219-236), <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10824669.2011.586299#preview>; Jones can be reached at jeff.jones@wmich.edu.

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Do you have feedback? Is anything missing?

If you have comments or suggestions, if you saw an article or web item in the last week that you think should have been summarized, or if you would like to suggest additional publications that should be covered by the Marshall Memo, please e-mail: kim.marshall48@gmail.com

About the Marshall Memo

Mission and focus:

This weekly memo is designed to keep principals, teachers, superintendents, and others very well-informed on current research and effective practices in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 41 years' experience as a teacher, principal, central office administrator, and writer, lightens the load of busy educators by serving as their "designated reader."

To produce the Marshall Memo, Kim subscribes to 44 carefully-chosen publications (see list to the right), sifts through more than a hundred articles each week, and selects 5-10 that have the greatest potential to improve teaching, leadership, and learning. He then writes a brief summary of each article, pulls out several striking quotes, provides e-links to full articles when available, and e-mails the Memo to subscribers every Monday evening (with occasional breaks; there are about 50 issues a year).

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Publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

American Educator
American Journal of Education
American School Board Journal
ASCD, CEC SmartBriefs, Daily EdNews
Better Evidence-Based Education
Ed. Magazine
EDge
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Week
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Elementary School Journal
Essential Teacher (TESOL)
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Education Letter
Harvard Educational Review
JESPAR
Journal of Staff Development
Kappa Delta Pi Record
Language Learner (NABE)
Middle Ground
Middle School Journal
New York Times
Newsweek
PEN Weekly NewsBlast
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal
Principal Leadership
Principal's Research Review
Reading Research Quarterly
Reading Today
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Teachers College Record
Teaching Children Mathematics
The Atlantic Monthly
The Chronicle of Higher Education
The Language Educator
The New Yorker
The Reading Teacher
The School Administrator
Theory Into Practice